

The Dead Sea Scrolls

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The Dead Sea Scrolls are ancient Jewish religious manuscripts that were found in the Qumran Caves in the Judean Desert, near Ein Feshkha on the northern shore of the Dead Sea in the West Bank (Kister, 2017, 710). The scrolls date from the mid-third century B.C.E. until the mid-first century C.E. It is also important to note that these scrolls first came to light in 1947 which is pretty recent. Also, the recency may also explain how Christians are grappling with supersessionism since the Holocaust. Some of the titles of the scrolls include the Community Rule, the Rule of the Congregation, and the Peshier Habakkuk, while I am unable to go through them all in this brief presentation, it would be important to know the scrolls represent Law and Prophecy.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, comprising of more than 800 documents made of animal skin, papyrus and even forged copper deepened our understanding of the Bible and shed light on the histories of Judaism and Christianity (Wise, 1996, 149). Among the texts are parts of every book of the Hebrew canon—what Christians call the Old Testament—except the book of Esther. The scrolls also contain a collection of previously unknown hymns, prayers, commentaries, mystical formulas and the earliest version of the Ten Commandments. What they do offer is insight into Jewish practice and belief—as well as Hebrew and Aramaic vocabulary and phraseology within the context in which earliest Christianity developed. The scrolls help us understand the complex relationship between early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism (Kister, 2017, 711). While the scrolls show few similarities with the sayings attributed to Jesus, they contain strong parallels to the epistles of Paul. It is also notable that none of the scrolls have sayings attributed to Jesus. There are texts that help us understand Jesus's Jewishness, but they give evidence for what Jesus may have said or did in any direct way. It is key to understand that the Dead Sea Scrolls actually say nothing about Jesus. They do however, say a lot about the world in which he lived (Kister, 2017, 711).

The Scrolls are especially helpful in understanding the messianic expectations of some first century Jews that surrounded Jesus. They offer a broad background for understanding the early Jesus movement, its roots, its ideology, its organization, and the phraseology it used. Passages from the scrolls help us understand the Jewish world of the Jesus tradition and the Gospels, they are the

backdrop to some central theological notions of Paul and have some parallels to the gospel of Matthew which will be beneficial to recall for this course. To conclude, I will note that the scrolls should not be studied in isolation; rather, an integrative study of the Hebrew Bible, various Jewish works of Second Temple Judaism—including the Dead Sea scrolls and the New Testament—and rabbinic Judaism is most instructive for all these fields of research.

Sources

- Kister, Menahem. “The Dead Sea Scrolls.” In *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed., 710–14. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Wise, Michael, M. Abegg, and G. Cooke. *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. San Francisco, 1996.